Trade Unionism Today

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REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE

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TRADE UNIONISM TODAY

The general question of the trade union movement is one of the most important problems facing the working class in the present period of the decline and decay of capitalist society, when permanent, mass unemployment, misery and social degradation, wars and revolutions have become characteristic features of the social system.

Can the trade unions still be used to protect the working class, as they did in the period of developing capitalism? Or has history made obsolete these instruments that won reforms and crumbs from the table of capitalism when it was driving forward on the basis of the industrial revolution?

We are of the opinion that, although the trade union movement today must be radically renovated, it will play a most important role in the further development of mankind, providing it is really understood. Mistaken concepts about the character and role of the trade union movement can lead to disastrous results for the working class. Its positive aspects as well as its limitations must be clearly defined.

EACH GAINS BY THE UNITY OF ALL

The trade unions were the first important organizations of the working class. As capitalism developed, the new working class, divorced from the land, found itself at the mercy of those who owned the mines, mills and factories. If they could not sell their commodity, labor power, they would starve. They soon learned that by banding together for a better price for their labor power **each could gain from the strength of the many.**

The class as a whole had a broad historic task and an immediate subordinate task. But because the subordinate problem was the important IMMEDIATE problem of the day, it became the axis of the trade union movement. That

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is, the workers banded together into trade unions in order to sell their labor power for a better price from week to week or from month to month. But the working class did not realize that this immediate problem was only a part and an **effect** of the real cause of their misery and poverty. Only a small part of the most active elements of the class understood that private ownership of the means of production is in reality simply the ownership of that which has been robbed from this and past generations of workers. Only a few understood that a "fair wage" can never solve the problem of exploitation so long as there is private ownership of the means of production, and capitalist instead of social appropriation of what is produced.

THE "FAIR WAGE" AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Labor power is a commodity, bought and sold on the market. But it is a unique commodity. It can be sold for its **full value,** then brought into the production process, where, as labor (belonging now to the capitalist), it **produces a value greater than its own value.** This surplus value, from which the capitalist gets his profits, belongs to the capitalist although he did not pay the worker for it when he bought and paid for the labor power. So long as the social system has as its foundation the rights of private property, instead of the human rights of social ownership of the means of production, so long will exploitation continue and a "fair wage" be a myth.

The trade union movement has fought for a "fair" price for the workers' labor power. It has not fought for the abolition of the wages system, the abolition of the exploitation of man by man. It has not fought for human rights based upon social ownership. Its leadership has defended private property and capitalist appropriation of what labor produces. To call for these just rights has been presented as a terrible crime by the paid agents of the exploiters, and the average worker has accepted this capitalist viewpoint. The working class must break out of this ideological fetter if it is to go forward.

The rapid growth of capitalism made it possible to pass on some of the crumbs of its tremendous profits to a **section** of the working class. This served the double purpose of dividing the workers, and pitting the better paid against the great mass of unskilled, in order to stem the tide of the class struggle.

In the broad sense, the economic and political reforms that were "given" to the working class were only by-products of the class struggle. The gains made, even though the bosses warped them and turned them in many instances against the workers, were due to the pressure of the working class against the capitalist class.

These by-products of the class struggle — reforms — were hailed by the Gompers and trade union leaders of yesterday as gains arising out of their policies of class collaboration. In reality, the workers obtained only the by-products instead of the substance, because their class pressure was diverted from its real mark by these collaborationist policies.

There is a world of difference between reforms as by products of the class struggle, and real working class gains made on an independent class basis.

Reforms are those material gains obtained as a result of the class pressure, but handed down from above to CHECK the class struggle. Real class gains include not only the day to day material gain, but, above all, are the direct result of the class pressure with the class taking a step forward under its own independent leadership. It is the difference between strengthening the grip of the labor agent of capitalism upon the workers, or disrupting this hold so that the workers can better fight the exploiters and their agents.

There are two aspects to this problem: the actual material gain and the relation of working class to capitalist class. The material gain is, in the last analysis, always **due** to class pressure, even when "granted" from above as a reform. The second aspect is the important question. How was the material gain won? Did the ex-

ploiters and their agents "beat us to the draw"? Were they able to tighten their political grip and domination over the working class? Or were we, as part of the working class, faster on the trigger? Were our organization and leadership under rank and file control, did we carry through a class struggle policy, was our leadership able to consolidate its position as a preparation for the next battle in the whole CLASS WAR? Here is the essence of the difference between reforms and class gains.

When capitalism was expanding, the exploiters could afford reforms to a section of labor as a means of creating a labor aristocracy to use against the great majority. But with capitalism in decay, the economic basis for even such crumbs has narrowed.

The "high" wages of American labor has been used to conceal the fact that the American worker was among the most highly exploited in the world. It is not generally understood that the degree of exploitation is determined by the relation of the wages to the commodities produced; and is not a question of low or high wages.

CAPITALIST DECLINE IN UNITED STATES

But now in decay capitalism history has caught up with us. Not only does the process of relative decline in the number of workers in relation to the means of production continue as in the past; but it has now transformed to an absolute decline in the number of workers while production continues to soar. That is one of the surface sores of internal decay of capitalism. It is an aspect of the permanent army of millions of unemployed. The Chickens have come home to roost. The U. S. with its "high" wage (the highest degree of exploitation) becomes the country with the greatest number of unemployed. The richest nation, the country with the best industrial system becomes the nation with the greatest unemployed — and still remains the country with the greatest number of unorganized workers.

With this economic decline there proceeds a decline in its political counterpart, the decline of bourgeois democracy. When bourgeois democracy was the flower

of capitalist development reforms could be granted. When the flower withers away with the drying up of the profit well, the reforms are fought most bitterly. Only by increased class pressure can any material gain be obtained or held today.

In the past when the accumulation of capital extended over years, reforms gained could be guarded over a number of years before bitter class oppression would snatch them away, and often one material gain would later be supplemented by even more material gains. But today, in decline, a material gain in one season can be wiped out before the next season, and the position of the working class placed in a more difficult position.

One who does not understand the difference between money wages and REAL WAGES has no place in the trade union struggle. A gain in money wages today can be wiped out in a commodity rise, inflation, etc., in less than a week. What may look like a victory, a raise in money wages, may in reality be a reduction of REAL WAGES. So too, what may look like a gain of the class, a reform instead of a class gain, may be a set-back for the class as a whole.

BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY AND REFORMS

The narrowing economic base of reforms, and the inability to grant important material gains in relation to the productive process forces the exploiters to placate the increasing class pressure (often pressure that is objective and leaderless) by granting social-reforms direct through the state structure, such as: social security measures, labor relations, etc. They may look good at the start, but these state measures are words and not deeds, (see the R.W.L. pamphlet "Social Security Measures") and at the same time tighten the state control over all labor organizations. This has a two-fold effect. It not only stems the tide of revolt but it also directs the class energy into false parliamentary channels instead of direct class action.

The agents of the capitalists in the workers ranks will advocate the political "independence" of the union movement. Under this formula they then proceed to

work for one of the two CAPITALIST parties, or the third, Labor party of capitalism. We don't think the workers in the unions should be compelled to vote for any parcticular party or candidate. They should have their independence. But the officials of the unions, if they represent the workers INTEREST will advocate NO SUPPORT TO ANY CAPITALIST PARTY; Democratic, Republican, Labor Party, etc. Vote only for a working class party. We of course will advocate a vote for the revolutionary Marxian party and candidates, who will promise nothing under capitalism, but a chance to furtehr expose the capitalists, and point out the plots against the workers they are hatching.

Above all we demand in the union the right of political expression for all working class groups, organizations and individuals. That is our main demand.

Today the economic conditions for the class as a whole become worse; real wages decline, but political reforms mainly void of material concessions are replacing to an extent the economic reforms. These political reforms, which the social reformists call "political action", have nothing in common with INDEPENDENT WORKING CLASS POLITICAL ACTION against the capitalists and their state. Capitalism in decline must use the state to grant the same reforms, to check the same type of independent working class action, that individual capitalists could grant yesterday. The effect of political, as well as economic, reforms, however, is the same — it ties the workers more firmly to capitalism.

THE UNIONS VS THE CLASS COLLABORATION LEADERS.

Because the reforms are being narrowed, are being limited in the United States, there are those who say that the trade unions have outlived their usefulness and are of no value, or that they are only reactionary instruments used against the class. This ultra-left and syndicalist position confuses changing class relations with the organization, the trade union.

Today the trade unions, in the hands of the class — collaboration leadership are reaching the dead-end as an

instrument that can wrest further reforms and maintain a living condition for its members. Even the nice worded "political" reforms without material substances are becoming threadbare. Class relations have changed due to the crisis and decline. The imperialist war in the end will only aggravate this condition. To confuse this class collaboration and gangster leadership with the union, the organization, is fatal for our class interests. The unions, even reactionary controlled unions are instruments of the working class. A brief contrast between a Company Union and a trade union controlled by reactionaries reveals this. The Company Union must be destroyed. The trade union on the other hand must merely oust the reactionary leadership.

INTERNATIONALISM

Yesterday the bosses said that the trade union was the product of the damn foreigners and used this argument to line up many American born workers for the bosses American (open shop) Plan. Since the first world war conditions in the country have changed. Whole layers of the American born workers are up to their necks in the trade unions. Now they have a new argument to divide the workers. They say the "reds" are agents of foreign countries and we must have pure "American" unions. It is simple to answer these fake arguments if one will just stop and think.

Workers are above all opposed to their OWN exploiters. Don't let them talk about some danger overseas. The bosses at home are picking our pockets. We are opposed to the exploiters. And we are for driving ALL agents of the bosses out of the trade unions. Most of the bosses agents are not foreign born, or have connections of any importance in other countries; most of them are 100% Americans; that is 100% for the boss.

WAS THE C. I. O. A PROGRESSIVE STEP?

After the 1929 crisis, with millions of unemployed, the OBJECTIVE conditions were responsible for a gigantic mass movement toward organization and for a great series of strikes. But the momentum for this movement

came not from the craft workers. New labor saving machinery has been eliminating the skilled worker from his former importance. And the new mass production industries with their large numbers of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, have become the center of gravity of the labor movement. The workers, therefore, drove towards industrial unionism.

But where in 1905, when the original I. W. W. was in the field, workers and leaders who believed in class struggle were united in a powerful movement; in the thirties the class struggle elements were disunited and in confusion due to the many defeats on a world scale and the scourge of Stalinism in their ranks. The Trotskyites played their role of treachery by making a turn and liquidating into the Second International at this point, thus further weakening what few forces there were that could help answer the problem.

But the capitalists and their agents were not asleep. It is true that people like Bill Green and Matthew Woll did not understand or foresee the rumble of class storms. But the New Deal forces, and their office boy, John L. Lewis, clearly understood it. So, Lewis, the arch reactionary who broke more strikes than any other labor leader, "changed" his spots and became the leader of the movement for industrial unions. Under the domination of the New Deal state apparatus, an agent of the capitalists with plenty of money stole a march on the revolutionists and others who believed in the class struggle.

All the "labor leaders" who claim to stand for the class struggle immediately joined the Lewis bandwagon. They all, from the Trotskyite lefts to the Stalinite rights, covered up their sell-out with the argument that LEWIS WAS ORGANIZING INDUSTRIAL INSTEAD OF CRAFT UNIONS. They confused class relations and class motion with leaders and organizations. They didn't understand that it was the mass of workers themselves who were fighting and demanding industrial unions; that new conditions demanded new instruments; and that Lewis was jumping to the head of this giant movement in order to behead it, to see to it that it didn't jump the capitalist traces.

These "lefts" made no distinction between the CIO leadership and Policies and the Union itself.

The movement of the working class beyond the confines of the narrow craft AFL unions into industrial unions was progressive. So was the big organization drive and the gigantic strike movement. But these developments occured **despite** Lewis. The CONTROL of the movement by the agents of the "democratic" capitalists, Lewis and his friends, the canalyzing of the movement into class collaboration channels, was reactionary.

It is quite true that the CIO has engaged in many strikes of a militant nature. But the A. F. L. in the past also engaged in many important strikes. This does not mean, however, that the CIO leadership is progressive, any more than the Gompers-Green leadership or program is progressive. It is the CLASS PRESSURE of the workers from below BREAKING THROUGH THE CONTROL OF THE BUROCRATS that is progressive. The class collaboration leaders are forced to go along with these class actions in order to sell out at the right moment, to stab the movement in the back. That is precisely what the Lewis leadership did. Note the auto strikes in 1936, '37, '39; the miners strike in 1939, etc.

Does this mean, then, that revolutionists should boycott the CIO, refuse to join it, or work within it? No. We are just as opposed to this policy, as the opportunist policy of giving support to Lewis and Co. We must work in reactionary trade unions, no matter who is at the head. We join and work within that union in which the majority of the organized workers are in, whether AFL, CIO, the Brotherhoods or an independent union.

Concretely in relation to the CIO, we advocate the following: Enter the movement of the masses. Help organize them and see to it that the workers in each local, in each industrial union retain RANK AND FILE CONTROL OF THE UNION. Fight all and sundry who present a CLASS COLLABORATION POLICY. That means in the CIO, fight against Lewis and Co.

The axis of the fight, however, must be a positive

program of class struggle, a fight against the boss. But the fight against the boss is possible only by fighting on two fronts, against the boss on the one hand, and his agents **within** the labor movement on the other. When Lewis and his cronies support the class collaboration policy and fight the class struggle line, revolutionists must expose them. Organize a Progressive Group within the CIO on this basis.

That is precisely the program that the Stalinites, Trotskyites, Socialists and Lovestoneites rejected in the CIO.

TRADE UNION UNITY

Ever since the split in the A. F. of L. the New Deal has been working ceaselessly for re-unification. No one recognized better than the leader of the New Deal that there is no difference in principle that separates the A. F. of L. and the C. I. O. Of course Roosevelt has his eye on the 1940 elections; he wants the whole labor vote for his particular candidate.

But more important than the election, Roosevelt is thinking of the role of American Imperialism in the present war. No country can fight an imperialist war effectively with labor divided at home. In order to get the most out of the war for the Wall Street crowd the New Deal must see to it that the class struggle is squelched. In that it is assured of the help of both the AFL and CIO leaderships. But, jurisdictional fights between these two agents of imperialism, Lewis and Green, can prove very costly. Roosevelt must eliminate this danger.

The New Deal wants unity in order to check the trade unions and line them up behind the Wall Street war plans. But the militants in the unions must reject this type of unity. They must demand and fight for a different type of unity; unity based on an INDUSTRIAL STRUCTURE and a CLASS STRUGGLE POLICY; unity based on rank and file control, with a leadership that will lead the militant battles of the working class, instead of collaborating and selling out to the bosses.

There can be no compromise with the class collaborationist, reactionary or racketeer leaders. To build a union

to win a strike, to fight the boss, means to fight the agents of the boss in our ranks, the class collaborationists, at the same time. Any trade union functionary who does not understand this cannot serve the interests of the union members.

To achieve this type of unity, the progressives in each union, regardless of their present political affiliations, must organize themselves in each local, in each union locally and nationally — regardless of whether A. F. L., C. I. O., or independent — on a common class struggle program. Unification must be accomplished on the general program outlined above as well as on the concrete tasks that confront the workers in each shop, mine and mill.

ORGANIZE THE UNORGANIZED

The job of organizing the unorganized will depend in the main on the progressives. That must be a pivot in their agitation within the union. People like Bill Green refuse to organize millions of workers who are not skilled craftsmen. Lewis refuses to organize the millions of unemployed workers because that means a fight against the New Deal, — because there's not enough dues in it for him. Only the progressives can really do the job of organizing the 30 million unorganized American workers.

All attempts to create a cleavage within the union, to divide one worker from another, must be fought viciously by the progressives. Such things as Jim Crowism must be smashed if the union is to have real democracy. Discrimination against the Negro worker can only weaken the working class as a whole, can only serve to divide its ranks and create a fertile ground for scabbing.

Special attention, too, must be given to problems of the youth, women workers, foreign-born workers, etc.

With permanent mass unemployment, the role of the youth, when they do enter industry, is of vital importance. The youth will make the best fighting union members once they are taught their class interests.

Under present conditions young workers, Negroes, female workers and others are used to batter down the living standards of the rest of the working class. All the

more reason why the progressives must take up the fight for these sections of the class and win them to working class solidarity.

One of the main tricks of the boss agents is to divide the Negro and white workers, the foreign-born and native workers, the male and female workers, youth and "oldsters", Jew and Gentile, etc. All these forms of discrimination and race hatred must be burned out of the trade union movement wherever they rear their heads. Most likely we will find them behind the American flag — under such slogan, for instance, as "America for the Americans."

With 14 or 15 million unemployed and with part time work (starvation) so widespread, the unemployed problem constitutes today a special and extremely vital problem. The trade unions in fighting for less hours of work and increased wages can win only if they have unity with the unemployed. The low relief and WPA standards for the unemployed tends to lower the wages of the whole working class. Unity with the unemployed is therefore much more than just an attempt to use the jobless so they will not scab for the boss. The unions must open the books to the unemployed, must exempt them from dues, must organize central bodies of unions and unemployed organizations to work out joint action for their common ends in every city.

WORKERS CONTROL OF PRODUCTION FOR USE.

Above all the progressive elements must take into account the special situation confronting the working class TODAY, the condition of capitalist decay, unemployment, war. The struggle merely for day to day demands by themselves is today worse than valueless. The day to day struggle for class gains can be of value only on the basis of connecting these demands with the ultimate demands through **a broad fundamental issue** that touches the very heart of exploitation and unemployment and imperialist war. The connecting link of the immediate demands with the class objective must be the struggle TOWARDS WORKERS CONTROL OF PRODUCTION FOR USE under a workers government. He

who does not point out that the struggle for immediate demands is necessarily limited and narrow at the present time is only deluding the workers. The struggle must be given a much broader perspective. That is what the concept of Workers Control of Production for Use attempts to achieve.

Concretely, the struggle for Workers Control of Production for Use will take on many forms, forms which can not be predicted or "blue-printed". But as a key part of the process the Progressives must work to establish working class organs that will lay the basis for Workers Control of Production in the future — workers defense squads, democratically elected shop committees, councils, etc. The real solution along this line will only be realized when the workers establish a WORKERS COUNCIL GOVERNMENT, a government of the workers and oppressed masses against the exploiter's rule, that will spring out of the shop and factory committees, by their duly elected representatives. Only under their own government can the workers really control production. It is impossible to talk of the solution of the problems that confront the trade union movement without taking steps to abolish the exploitation of man by man, steps toward a system of production for use instead of production for profit.

SHOP COMMITTEES

Under the leadership of the reformists the control of the unions has been taken away completely from the rank and file, and placed into central burocratic domination. As long as this condition exists, as long as there is no democracy in the union, a gigantic obstacle stands in the way of effective action against the exploiters. The road toward working class rule, toward industrial democracy, toward human rights based on social ownership of the means of production, lies through the WORKERS CONTROL OF THEIR OWN MASS ORGANIZATIONS.

One of the most important steps in the trade union movement toward this objective is the establishment of a democratically elected Shop Committee in every mine, mill, and factory. Because the members of the Shop Com-

mittee work in the same plant, are so close to the rest of the workers, have the same interests, etc., they are the "big stick" in speading the union, maintaining the gains already won and fighting for others.

Where the plant is still unorganized the establishment of a Shop Committee, a nucleus of the first union men, is a base for the organization of the rest of the men, a big step toward complete unionization.

Where the plant is already partly organized but where there are divisions in the ranks of the workers, the Shop Committee is an effective instrument to unify the activity of the workers. In such instances progressives must fight for a Shop Committee elected by ALL the workers in the plant, those in the two or more rival unions, as well as those who are unorganized. The Shop Committee must work out collective plans for job control and involve all the workers, regardless of their present differences, in the struggle against the boss and his attempts to divide the forces in the plant and thus rule against all. Unity in the shop on this basis is the firm foundation upon which unity of the class will be achieved and one powerful industrial union in the industry, and one national confederation of trade unions, will be built.

In strikes and in other class actions the Shop Committee becomes the main instrument of the working class to fight and defend its interests against the exploiters. It organizes Workers Defense Squads and other instruments to defend the strikers and spread the strike.

The Shop Committee is the instrument by which the UNION IS BROUGHT BACK INTO THE FACTORY from the swivel chairs of the burocrats in the union front offices. No official who is for the workers can possibly be opposed to this. The Local Unions can be democratic only when and if they permit democracy in the plants, the right for the Shop Committees to settle all problems that affect their plants — subject, of course, to the approval of the men themselves.

As a corollary to the Shop Committees and another key element in union democracy and the struggle against the boss, the workers in each plant must demand a

Steward System of democratically elected Stewards in each department to take up the grievances of the men and other problems as they arise. The Stewards in nine cases out of ten are the most militant and best developed trade union elements in those unions where they are democratically elected. Those burocrats who permit the Steward System to be dissolved, in effect, are strengthening the boss' position.

The democratically elected shop committees and the stewards are the natural organizational forms that develop into WORKERS COUNCILS and eventually, where the workers are strong enough, bring into life their slogan for WORKERS CONTROL OF PRODUCTION FOR USE. In this role the shop committees will be a vital sector of working class rule against the exploiters, of the new working class state that will replace capitalism.

SHALL WE HELP WALL STREET IN ITS WAR PREPARATIONS?

Now that the 2nd World War — imperialist war — has started in Europe and the war in Asia continues, the exploiters in America are openly preparing to take part in the mad race for profits and the redivision of the earth. This is a war of plunder in which the workers of the United States, as well as the workers of every other capitalist country, have nothing to gain and everything to lose. The workers have no fatherland in any capitalist country. They have no national interests.

Sad to say, however, many labor "leaders" are already lined up to support the Morgans and Rockefellers in the imperialist war, to peddle "Liberty" Bonds, smash strikes, and keep the working class lined up behind the capitalist war. Of course today, these labor agents in our ranks — Lewis, Green and all the rest — tell the trade union members that they are against war — BUT, if the United States must "defend" itself they will fight. Meanwhile, however, they utter not a word against the big war budgets; they do not organize a single strike or any other action against shipment of war supplies to the warring powers, against America's M Day plans and other war steps, against the fingerprinting of and spying on men in

the essential war plants, etc. etc.

During the war the trade union burocrats, who sell out to the bosses in peacetime, will be a most important factor for the capitalists. If the organized trade union movement cannot be lined up for the slaughter and the working class made docile, made to suffer the lowered standard of living and made to act as cannon fodder — without this docility induced by the labor fakers the Morgans and Rockefellers would have their hands full.

The rank and file workers in the trade unions (and outside) must make it clear **now** that they will not support the bankers, the industrialists, the politicians and their henchmen in any kind of a war that they drag the American people into. They must prepare to strike the war plants, must fight for all war funds to the unemployed, and other such demands.

Naturally with their control of all avenues of expression the capitalists will more than justify, in words, the war as a just war and good war, just as they did the last war. Under no circumstances, however, should the workers fall for this. The working class has only one war to fight — the class war for working class emancipation, the emancipation of mankind from exploitation of man by man.

THE INDUSTRIAL UNION AND THE VANGUARD

The Revolutionary Workers League of the United States, the revolutionary Marxist organization, fights for the trade union program outlined above. We will take our place with the rest of the working class against capitalism. We are opposed to any political or other organization dominating, controlling, or using the trade union movement for its own ends. Our members, as trade unionists, fight side by side with all workers on the battle fronts of the class war, and through democratic channels endeavor to ideologically influence the masses to carry out the program of Marx and Lenin.

There is a proper and essential division of labor between the unions of the workers and the political party of the workers so that in no way do they contradict each other; on the contrary they supplement each other.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS
OF MARXISM

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